

METROPOLITAN

Mediator quells neighborhood feuds

by Robert Lothian

Communication is the main ingredient in resolving interpersonal disputes. But according to Emmanuel Paris, director of the Neighborhood Mediation Center, neighbors sometimes live next door to each other for years, letting hostilities simmer without talking.

When there is no mechanism for diffusing the situation, he said, simmering hostilities can lead to involvement of the police and courts, even violence.

The Mediation Center exists so that neighbors and small business people can resolve their disputes peacefully outside the courts.

"If no crime has been committed yet there is a lot of underlying tension because of disputes, then a much simpler process is needed," said Paris. "A lot of cities have neighborhood mediation as an alternative to the courts and the police."

A free service sponsored by the Portland Office of Neighborhood Associations, the Center offers a staff of three mediation specialists who act as the crucial middle men in disputes.

Sometimes, the problem can be handled by a phone conversation or by referral to another agency, said Paris. But often the Center's Mediators go out to the neighborhoods and meet with those who are arguing. The average case can be resolved in about 1 1/2 hours of talking, he said, but some real sticklers have taken up to 16 hours in several sessions at the Center office.

The bottom line, said Paris, is a contractual agreement "that is mutually agreeable and acceptable to both parties."

In the Center's five years of operation, he said, it has received an average of 1,000 complaints per year, and taken some action on about 5,500 cases. In 1983, parties in 315 out of 347 disputes handled by the Center approved of the outcome when routinely contacted 30 days later.

The mediation process not only saves the disputing parties and the criminal justice system money and time, said Paris, it also makes converts who will hopefully go through their lives knowing better how to resolve disputes on their own.

Disputes are referred to the Center by the District Attorney's office, the Neighborhood Crime office, the police and other agencies. Sometimes the disputing parties just call or come in.

Common problems dealt with in mediation are trespassing, littering,



Emmanuel Paris helps neighbors to resolve conflicts through mediation. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)

harassment, trash, petty theft, landlord/tenant disputes and pet control. "Whenever there is a problem with animals, we realize people are involved, also," said Paris.

One contract delivery dispute involving two small businesses in the Southwest area was resolved only after several sessions totalling 16 hours with lawyers for both sides present. "Both parties actually had their attorney ready for a court battle," said Paris, "but they reached a written agreement without going to court."

Another dispute involved two apartment house tenants. One was a 6'2", 350 lb. man who lived above a woman whose daughter was an honor student and needed quiet to study. The dispute was resolved when one of the Center's mediators, Eddie Collins, brought the parties together and the woman realized that the man's noise was due to his size and not personal hostility directed at her and her daughter. "What we try and get them to understand is that in apartment house living you are going to hear the other person," said Collins.

"Often, we see the solutions right away," but it may take disputing neighbors several hours to finally see the light, said Collins. Sometimes neighbors have disputed for so long

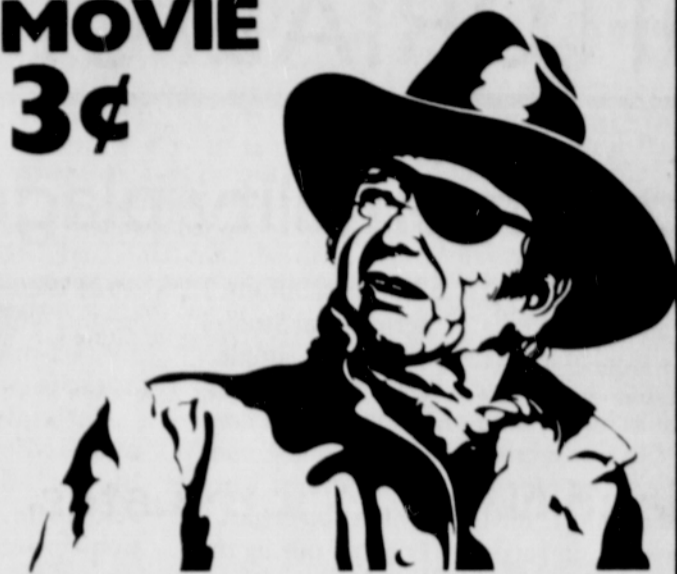
they can't remember the original source of the problem, he said.

The Neighborhood Mediation Center's staff also includes mediator Jacqueline Carey-Webb, secretary Yvonne Cardwell and 35 trained volunteers.

Paris has been director since 1978. He attended Central Catholic High School and received a B.A. in education from the University of Oregon. As a member of the Teacher Corps, he taught at McClaren, Hillcrest, Jefferson and John Adams High Schools, and the Albina Youth Opportunity School.

Mediation has potential for resolving disputes not only in neighborhoods, but in the schools, prisons, even in custody battles, according to Paris. The Center's advisory committee is currently studying the possibility of going non-profit and contracting with the city and other agencies. Going non-profit might enable the center to expand into new areas, said Paris. The Neighborhood Mediation Center can be contacted at 284-2829.

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